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ABSTRACT

This paper explores the relationship between cultural background and individual styles of learning (cognitive styles) among elementary school students. The hypothesis is that, in spite of dangers inherent in generalizing about all children of a specific culture, there are customary methods of education and child rearing in each cultural group which strongly influence cognitive learning styles for children of that group. Literature on Native Americans, for example, indicates that their greatest strength in learning is through visual channels and that Native American students have a bent for subjects such as penmanship, spelling, and art. Chicano students, on the other hand, excel in cooperative rather than competetive behavior and achieve the most in situations involving peer instruction rather than task centered or analytical learning. Still other differences have been noted in learning patterns of Asian American students. For example, it was suggested in a 1972 study comparing Japanese and Chinese American second graders to second graders from other cultural backgrounds that the widely held Asian cultural values of perserverance, restraint, and patience seemed to result in a precise and accurate learning style which transferred particularly well to spatial and numerical reasoning and less well to verbal learning. The conclusion is that teachers will improve their ability to teach children from other cultures if they are aware of and attempt to work constructively with cultural differences. Suggestions for helping teachers recognize and deal with these differences include that they maintain close contact with parents and community groups, provide learning centers where visual and aural learning are encouraged, and give recognition to students for achievement in art, music, athletics, manual dexterity, and social skills as well as verbal skills. (DB)

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LEARNING STYLES: WHAT EVERY TEACHER SHOULD CONSIDER

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LEARNING STYLES: WHAT EVERY TEACHER SHOULD CONSIDER

One ship sails east
Another west by the self-same gales that blow
It's the set of the sails and not the gales
That determine the way they go.

Each of us has a special style of learning: our own particular manner of setting our sails so that we can catch the educational breezes in our environment. These sets may be determined by our genes, our ethnic or cultural heritage, our sensory modality strengths or through previous educational experience.

Rita and Kenneth Dunn suggest that teachers consider the following elements of learning style:

The Environmental Element

Individual student's preferences in relation to sound, light, temperature and design.

The Emotional Element

Factors related to individual motivational or incentive influences, patterns of persistence, responsibility and amount of supervision required.

The Sociological Element

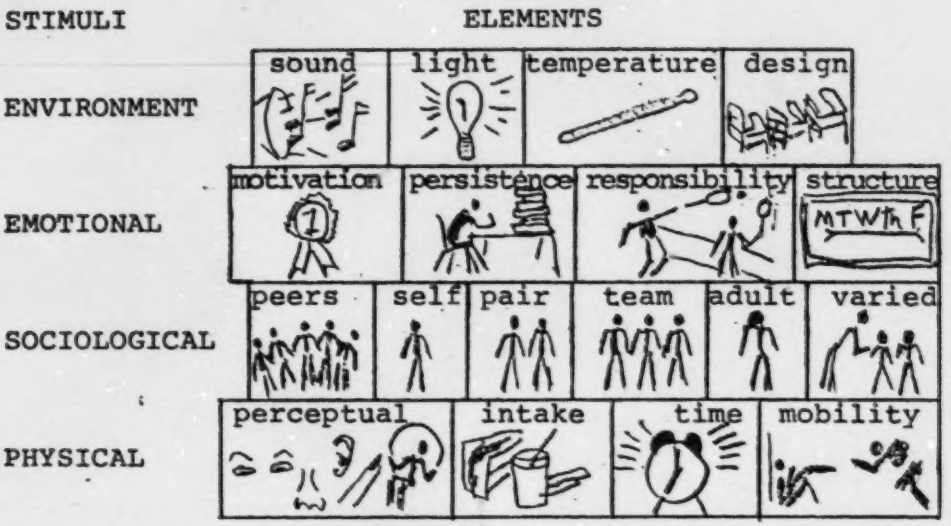
Student's preferred social contacts or patterns for learning. For example, some learn best from peers, others from adults; some prefer to work alone and others to study with a group.

The Physical Element

Individual perceptual strengths, "intake" or nutritional needs, and needs for physical change of pace and mobility.

These elements are represented in the following chart:

DIAGNOSING LEARNING STYLE



Designed by Dr. Rita S. Dunn
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Many teachers have not been aware of the relationship of differences in learning styles to a student's cultural background. Recent culturally related reports provide interesting clues. These culturally related factors may be used to explain or extend some of the elements or sub-elements listed by Dunn and Dunn.

Cognitive Style

Castaneda presents the following diagram to illustrate the influence of the life styles and value systems of a child's cultural group upon his cognitive style:

Values and life style of a cultural group ⇨ Styles of teaching and child rearing ⇨ Children's communication styles; Human relational styles; Incentive-motivational styles; Ways of perceiving and thinking (learning styles) } Cognitive Style

The diagram illustrates the influence of the values and traditional life style of a specific cultural group upon the customary methods of child rearing. These child rearing practices which include systems for rewarding and punishing, cultural goals and socialization practices reflect the group's value system and influence the individual ways of communicating and learning, the types of philosophy, activities, experiences and objects which are psychologically, emotionally and materially rewarding and a perceptive framework for viewing and relating to the environment. This communication, incentive and perceptive system determines the individual's thinking or cognitive learning style.

Because of these culturally related learning styles, children may differ in their ability to respond to specific learning approaches. To improve the educational opportunities for children of differing cultural backgrounds, the educational systems must not only recognize but also utilize these differences.

Although it is dangerous to generalize for all children of a specific culture, perceptive teachers who are aware of culturally-related research may be able to help students of differing groups by providing alternative approaches. Choices may be offered so that students may capitalize upon their culturally determined strengths. Approaches may be varied so that students may also learn to expand and improve their educational opportunities by trying new learning methods in an environment which accepts and respects cultural differences. What are some reported differences which may represent strengths when teachers utilize differing learning styles effectively?

Native American Students

Literature on Native American students indicates that their greatest strength in learning is through visual channels. This has been shown in studies comparing their scores on the Draw-a-Man test, in drawing to show visualization of stories and in their ability to learn through observation. They have excelled in penmanship, spelling and art; all visually related skills.

These visually-related strengths may be overlooked in the typical classroom where verbal skills are given much greater emphasis. Children

in these classrooms are encouraged to be curious, to question and to relate verbally with the instructor. In the typical non-Indian classroom, students are taught to listen and be active learners. The learner is encouraged to respond, to initiate action, to try and then try again. Learning is achieved through trial and error.

For the Native American student, however, the main system of learning has been through careful observation and carefully directed practice. Sometimes these children are taught to wait and see what is expected of them and to do their self-testing in private, to be very sure that they will be successful before initiating action before their peers. Their teachers have been adults within the family who base their instruction upon modeling and students learn through imitation. There is no curiosity as to why a specific technique is used since the method is part of the family or tribal traditions and used daily by those who are loved and respected.

In a non-Indian classroom, Native American children may seem reserved and withdrawn. They may be confused by wordy explanations and the lack of demonstration. Teachers who understand the teaching and learning style of Native American students will not interpret this reserve as stubborness, lack of initiative or lack of cooperation and will provide better demonstrations and allow for private practice.

Many Indian students resist individual competition as a motivational device. Since anonymity, cooperation and sharing are more valued in most Indian cultures than personal notoriety, competitiveness and personal accumulation of material possessions, these students usually work best when they are able to cooperate and share with their peers, when they can contribute through group responses or work individually with the teacher.

Chicano

Kagen and Madsen have shown that when given tasks which required cooperative rather than competitive behavior, Mexican and Mexican-American or Chicano students were superior to their Anglo-American peers. When the tasks required competitive behavior the results were reversed. To help these students achieve, learning will be increased

by providing activities which present content through peer interaction.

Teachers of Chicano and other Hispanic students should also be aware of the influence of the patriarchal system within the traditional homes of the culture. This system may influence boys' and girls' reaction to female teachers - particularly during adolescent years. Girls may hesitate to demonstrate achievement in the presence of boys in the classroom and boys approaching manhood may resent working with an authoritarian female instructor.

Studies of field sensitivity and field independence indicate that Mexican-American students may be more field sensitive than their Anglo-American peers. Field sensitive persons are more imaginative in describing social situations and prefer to work in established social relationships. School settings, however, frequently foster field dependent learning. Such learning is task centered, analytical and content rather than "people" centered. To meet the needs of Chicanos or Mexican-American students and those of many other cultures, more attention needs to be given to field sensitivity in teaching and learning.

This sensitivity may be related to the strong family ties which influence the motivational or incentive styles of Chicano students. Various studies suggest that these students are highly motivated by social reinforcement and desire to work for the prestige and welfare of the family. Ernest R. Hilgard states "(these) pupils experience satisfaction when they realize that they are needed, when they can help others in meaningful ways".

Asian American

A study by Ayabe and Santo in 1972 found that Japanese and Chinese second graders were superior to those of other cultures in responding quickly and with fewer errors when tested in conceptual tempo or speed of response. When not forced to respond quickly however, Chinese students were inclined to be reflective and take longer to respond. It is suggested that cultural values of perseverance, restraint and patience may account for the precision and accuracy of their learning style. Teachers need to be aware of the extra time Chinese students would prefer for accuracy upon careful reflection.

A study by Stodolsky and Lesser in 1967 comparing Chinese, Jewish, Negro and Puerto Rican children showed Chinese children to be relatively strong in spatial, numerical and reasoning rather than on verbal tasks. A more recent study by Chen and Goon (1976), however, indicated that gifted Chinese American children possess verbal skills equal to or superior to those of their non-Asian gifted peers in spite of the fact that English was their second language. Parents' respect for learning and emphasis upon bilingual achievement may account for this ability.

Vietnamese students have had a tradition of respect for education and educators and are characterized by teachers as eager, willing students. Their traditional educational system, however, was based more upon role learning, memorization, repetition and recitation than is the teaching and learning of the American school. Teachers should be cautious in generalizing since differences may be found, according to whether children have come from rural or urban settings.

Implications

To recognize differing learning styles, teachers need to be observant and responsive to students' preferences and needs and to provide an educational environment which allows all students to learn in their best manner. Specific suggestions might include the following:

1. Maintain close contact with individual parents and community groups to learn cultural values, child rearing practices, communication styles and motivational systems which influence children's styles of learning.
2. Provide learning centers and team learning experiences which allow students to work cooperatively rather than competitively. These centers should provide options and choices to accommodate varieties of learning modalities. Opportunities in the centers should provide for learning visually through listening and through experimentation and practice. Children should be allowed to choose the peers with whom they believe they can work best and boys should not be forced to work with girls (or vice versa) if this is frowned upon by a specific culture.

3. During class response time, recognize differences in response time needed by students and provide longer wait-time for students who wish to be reflective. Respect the wishes of students who feel uncomfortable in responding before the class and provide opportunities for choral responses or private sessions with the teacher if verbal feedback is necessary.
4. Give as much recognition and provide opportunities for students who excell in art, music, athletics, manual dexterity and social skills as well as verbal skills emphasized in many classrooms.
5. Recognize that culture-specific learning styles may vary among subgroups and among individuals within a culture. The amount of acculturation or assimilation to the American culture may also cause variations among students from differing ethnic groups. For successful teaching and learning, however, teachers need to be aware of possible strengths and preferences which may be present. All children deserve the opportunity to learn in the manner which they prefer.

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